

## The Unaccounted Voice of Women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's

### *Purple Hibiscus*

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#### **Abstract**

In our society, values of life is neither constant nor equal to all. Apart from economic conditions, the importance of women in under developing countries still suffers from blind gender disparity. Their voices are always suppressed in family as well as in society. The only solution to raise their importance is at the hand of law. The liberation of women in under developing countries is moving slow like a snail's journey. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* realistically portrays the suppressed voices of African women through the characters Beatrice Achike-the Mama, Auntie Ifeoma, and Kambili Achike. Dissent is never entertained and taken on the right spirit by any government in the world. And therefore, the emotions and the desires of African women are taken unaccounted. This perhaps is the effect

of poor literacy, lack of awareness found in under developing territories of Africa. This theme of the unaccounted voice of women is to be discussed in this research paper.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Africa, Gender Equality, Unaccounted Voice, Domestic Exploitation, Patriarchal Society.

## **Introduction**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who was born in 1977 is one of the notable writers of Nigeria. At the age of 10, she got inspiration from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This inspiration developed her to become an award-winning author in both in fiction and in prose. Her early works talked about gender partiality, cultural shock and identity crisis. Her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* which was published in the year 2003 received positive reception from literary critics. In the year 2005, she received Commonwealth Writers' prize for this novel. After this success, she started to produce prominent novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *Americanah* (2013) and *Notes on Grief* which is her latest work published in 2021. Among these works, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and *Americanah* (2013) portrayed women characters under the clutches of social boundaries. Adichie did not portray main women characters as liberal and self-motivated. They were shown as voiceless community entwined immature social practices. Adichie wants to justify that these kinds of women from African territories should raise their voice against all kinds of violence, if not, they will be ever suppressed and left as unaccounted. A woman should understand her self-respect rather than merely practicing submissive behaviour within her family. For this reason, women are instructed by scholars and activists to widen their horizons of knowledge through proper education. This paper is about to explore how the voice of women character is left unaccounted because of domestic violence imposed by men.

## **Patriarchal Oppression in the Life of African Women**

Adichie as a writer tries to contribute her valuable ideologies against male-centered African society. Being true to her conscience, She earnestly tries to show the women characters mostly as voiceless till the end. It means that she wants realistically picturize the pain of a mother, a daughter and all women related roles who suffer from the cruel behavior of male characters. In deep observation, reader could understand the silent speeches of women's hearts. Adichie does not focus on the marginalized voices of struggling women, but she projects on the multitudes of women and projects them as invisible speakers or representatives of the male-centered African families. It is like the difference between mother Catherine and daughter Catherine found in *Wuthering Heights*. Mother Catherine was a little bit submissive where as her daughter was not projected like that. Like this a reader could differentiate the transformation of Kambili during her visit to Ifeoma's house. Ifeoma teaches the true meaning of freedom to Kambili that is not understood by Beatrice Achike. Eugene Achike is like a devil who haunts his family till his death. Rest of the women characters are like victims in the perspective of general readers.

This condition makes the women to offer a realm to the male dictators to fulfil their wishes. So, gradually they lose their identity in their family. Their loss of identity makes them as voiceless and removes their rights to raise their voices against the domination of men. Like many other developing countries, the institution of marriage in Africa is like a disguised government where married women are issued with the license to be a permanent subordinate to their husbands. Adichie addresses this issue under the label of inequality. She tries to reform her society through her works. This Patriarchal force keeps the women like Kambili, Beatrice and Ifeoma as submissive in the name of African social structure. They are continuously being exploited and ill-treated. Adichie's justifications do not adhere to conservative thinking. Her projection of female characters is as equal as celebrating great

leaders who reformed this society through their ideologies. Adichie does not take forward her women characters as a symbol of permanent slaves. Instead of that, they are projected as great decision makers of their life. They attain their freewill at the end of the story after experiencing immeasurable mental and physical agony in the family. Their evolution happens from helpless submissive destitutes to self-supportive assertive emancipators. Adichie tries to delve into all types of burning issues in the African families. They come with different faces to keep the women as caged birds. Women are instructed to follow many social practices in the name of religion, politics, culture, gender, language, dress code, and tradition. There is an irony in these practices. Most of the structures are left to the free will of men, in following the practices. So the gender itself gives all the rights to men since their birth.

In African society the exploitation against women begins from their birth itself. Kambili and Beatrice vehemently represent the sufferings of third and fourth world women. Even in this twenty first century, the gap in gender equality is an immeasurable abyss in under developing countries. Women like Beatrice are left with no space to choose their world after marriage. Their desires are controlled by men like Eugene. In the name of religion and domestic culture, Beatrice and Kambili are treated as puppets. They are the people who live in the edge of humiliation in their families and their opinions are left as unheard even in little things like choosing a favourite colour for window curtains. This shows that gender equality is just a wild unattainable dream for many women across the world.

### **The Unaccounted Voices**

The story of *Purple Hibiscus* blooms in post-colonial Nigeria. The country as a whole is found facing uncertainty both politically and economically. This gets painfully reflected in the houses of Nigerian civilians. Eugene Achike and Beatrice Achike are introduced as father and mother of Kambili and Jaja. Kambili is assigned as the narrator of this fiction in some situations. She initially remembers the Palm Sunday incident after three years. She recalls the

brutal behaviour of her father in the name of punishment through this past event. Kambili and Jaja, on reaching adulthood understand the importance of freedom in life. Only in this stage of adulthood, Kambili could analyze and criticize her father's behaviour since she was not strong and mature enough in her childhood. Here Adichie registers that many African women like Kambili and her mother are unable to resist the violence caused by men. So, Adichie represents the unaccounted emotions of women through the character of Kambili.

When Kambili was at the age of fifteen, she was the witness and victim of her father's brutal punishments. She could not neither react or oppose to stop this harassment. She thought that if she tried to question him, she would receive injustice as a result. Here her anger against her father is unaccounted since she did not practice the act of defiance. "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female - whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male." (Simone De Beauvoir 85). Like many family heads, this unregistered protest is taken as an advantage by men to continue their domestic violence. Her silence was teased by her fellow classmates. They called her as 'backyard snob'. In reality she was not a snob and she wanted to be normal like others. But her fear towards her father did not give a space to think freely.

The onset of Nigerian civil war tossed her family and forced them to move to her aunt's house situated in Nsukka. In Aunt Ifeoma's house Kambili, found her space to feel the value of freedom for first time in her life. However, her suppressed fear did not allow her to embrace the love of her aunt. "I felt as if my shadow was visiting Aunt Ifeoma and her family, while the real me was studying in my room in Enugu, my schedule posted above me" (Purple Hibiscus 125). Aunt Ifeoma was Kambili's eye opener against her invisible chain of fear. Kambili's voice got the courage to be registered without any suppression at first time through her aunt's support. Her aunt made her raise her voice against any kind of dominance and her practice started with her cousin Amaka. Through the disturbances caused by Amaka,

Kambili started to learn of handling abnormal characters. The Voice of Kambili was ignored by her father and her silence was taken as granted to torture her mother. Kambili as a daughter represents the painful condition of African children who experience mental torture from their parents. She swallows her emotions whenever she encounters the brutal behavior of her father against her mother. It gets ingrained and registered as a deep scar in her heart. Her memories are filled with the bleeding face of her mother.

She cried for a long time. She cried until her hand, clasped in hers, felt stiff. She cried until Auntie Ifeoma finished cooking the meat in a spicy stew. She cried until she fell asleep, her head against the seat of the chair. Jaja laid her on a mattress on the living room floor (*Purple Hibiscus*249).

Kambili is always like a silent witness against the domestic violence. Her silence continues as unaccounted. This is the same condition of Beatrice also. As a mother, she could not take any tough decision until she poisons Eugene. Most of the buried voices become responsible for taking wrong decision like suicide and self-destruction. Here Beatrice can be compared with the character called Sethe in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Sethe is also like Beatrice who had not raised her voice against slavery and she killed her own daughter. It does not make any sense and the buried girl child later tries to register its identity by asking questions to her mother. Somehow the characters try to voice out the accountability of their existence. Now Kambili broke her silence at her aunt's home and understood the power of her unaccounted opinions. This is a hidden impetus introduced by the author to all submissive African women who are suffering from domestic violence. When the family heard the demise of Papa Nnukwu, they started to perform pagan funeral. Kambili noticed that Amaka was crying into the toilet. It was little bit louder to her. This made Kambili to think about the 'art of silent crying'. So across many centuries, around the world, the unaccounted voices of women were delivered only through this type of crying. The once broken silence of Kambili

gets restored again when she returned to her father's house after the funeral. The only voice that rose against Eugene was aunt Ifeoma. She did not pay her attention to his anger when he argued about not performing funeral by the catholic norms. However, the strong voice was ignored by Papa and thrown as unaccounted. Eugene does not attend his funeral, although Aunty Ifeoma asks him to sponsor the funeral. His Christian practice is an anxious exercise in making a complete break with the past. (Meyer 447-474). Since Eugene Achike was an ardent follower of Catholicism, he turned his anger towards Kambili, on seeing the painting of his grandfather gifted by Amaka. "Violence and religion are in fact the strange bedfellows that account for the biggest irony in *Purple Hibiscus*." (Ouma59). He called this action as 'walking into sin', so he poured hot water on Kambili's feet. This time Kambili did not break her silence but suffered from inside. In this condition, her mother smeared salt to heal her wounds instead of fighting against her cruel husband. Painful voices of these two women is left as unaccounted, so their life was subjected to suffer in a state of eternal hell.

In this novel, the brutal punishment by men continues without any resistance or opposition by the women folk. These women's unaccounted emotions are projected through the tearful eyes and scorched feet. The condition of women characters is the result of post-colonial marginalized social conditions. Around the world, patriarchal society and ensuing gender partiality are acknowledged as common issues. But in the case of under developing African countries, condition of women is classified under black feminism. Though the story runs in the native land, the indirect force of 'western culture dominance' underplays as an influential element through the face of religion. The major cause behind the abusive behaviour of Eugene is his tough practice of Catholicism. Under this condition, African women struggle more to escape from this male dominant society. The unaccounted voices of women keep them as an identity-less community and erases their importance in family as well as in society. Adichie is a sensible writer who retrieves the lost voices of native African

women through literature. “African writers have a duty to use their works to contribute actively to the reshaping of their respective societies and cultures.” (Akpome 9847). At least she gives a space to record the practical truth of under developing countries with the focus on gender issues.

Like a volcanic eruption, the so called brutal Papa was poisoned and Jaja took the responsibility for this crime to save his mother. “I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. (Purple Hibiscus 290). Beatrice gets her emancipation by her own effort, because her crime is accepted by her son. Adichie’s this stand is to show the good side of men. Indirectly Jaja gives a confidence to Kambili and changes her negative thoughts about men in society. However, no open voice and harsh dialogues are delivered against Eugene by his wife. Though she poisoned him, her suppressed emotions are still unaccounted and left as forgotten. After his death, Mama’s emotions turned as unaccounted once again but in different perspective. This time it is not about the torture but her grief. Her grief keeps her remain calm, only the walls of home could listen her loss. This silence is not the extension of her submissive attitude but the reflection of priceless freedom that she attained. Beatrice climbed to the top of the centralized position in her family. Though it is not the right way to react, Beatrice is left with no choice. In this case her decision represents a one woman revolution against the so called patriarchal society. Now her boundaries are broken and she could make her choices freely without any dictates. There is no need to plead and pray to get her voice registered. Adichie does not justify Beatrice’s choice of killing her own husband but readers could accept this because of Eugene’s tyrant behavior. Divorce like choices are not mentioned in this novel. However this novel shows the ugly truth behind the sufferings of African women who are struggling to attain their freedom under poor social structures of Africa. Broadly, the removal of male influence could be a key to acquire the required mental space women need within their family. The men should try to influence women in their

families through love and gender equality and not through patriarchal dictatorship. Aunt Ifeoma leaves for America, now Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice Achike start to breathe the fresh air of independent life. But the struggle that they undergo to attain this state of freedom is really painful.

## **Conclusion**

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* talks about many burning issues such as domestic violence, religious influence, colonialism, effects of civil war, and the brutal side of male community in African families. Above all these issues, Eugene's abusive behavior is elaborately analyzed in this paper over the theme of unaccounted voices. Adichie has projected Eugene as a more inhuman than abusive personality. Adichie strongly hits the dark side of patriarchal society in this novel. She insists the importance of women education towards the path of emancipation, gender equality and zero exploitation. This would be the only way to overcome the suppression of all kinds of exploitations. She expects African women should not be a victim by maintaining silence. Their sufferings are not delivered with a strong voice but with tears. Their decentralized condition in family reflects the condition of Postcolonial Africa. Adichie as an author wants to change the face of masculinity and remove the power of male centralized tradition. After the death of Eugene, Beatrice's identity in the family is restored and she gets a space to express her desires without any fear. Till the end author indirectly insists the importance of women's raising voice against the unbearable torture of patriarchal society.

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